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# Rurality

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RURALITY  
A BFA Exhibition

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of Honors

By  
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The Honors College  
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East Tennessee State University  
December 6, 2013



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## ABSTRACT

## RURALITY

By

Storm Ketron

Bachelor of Fine Arts Exhibition, *RURALITY*, held at Tipton Street Gallery, 126 Spring Street, Downtown Johnson City, TN, from December 2<sup>nd</sup> through December 6th. The show exhibit consists largely of works done on bristol board known as the Discography Series, as well as a larger installation piece. The pieces introduce ideas of labor, materiality, and time.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my family and friends who without their support, dedication, and sacrifice, none of this could have been possible, and to my professors for their invaluable knowledge.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the start of this thesis I set out to figure out what it all meant, how being raised and creating art in the South has affected the pieces I produce, who it is I am trying to make art for/about, and why I am so drawn to futility. I use this thesis as a tool to try and figure out the answer to these questions. I am trying to understand why issues of time, materiality, and structure are present in the works that have come to represent my artistic practice over the course of my undergraduate career.

## CONCEPTS OF TIME (TIME)

Time has played a crucial role as a dictator of studio practice as well as a tool of production. I began researching how the idea of time as a set construct that controls and limits the amount of decision making an artist can engage in has played a role in several artists' practices. On Kawara created this limitation of allotted time to complete a painting in his "Today Series", in which he allows himself one day to complete the painting. "If not finished by the close of the day, the partially completed painting is destroyed" ("On Kawara American, b. Japan, 1932"). This forced Kawara to make decisions on an almost impulsive level. "On Kawara seeks to depict the notion of time itself" ("On Kawara American, b. Japan, 1932"). He sets out to produce art that challenges the time it takes to implement and produce this series of paintings. Kawara creates a sense of time and place where the viewer is able to understand that the artist is interested in expressing these concepts. He sets out to represent moments of activity and at times a sense of urgency while having the control of the format of his canvas sizes as a force to hold in the process of producing work on a time limit. "Kawara brings time-which may be thought of as the major organizational force behind human experience and consciousness into a tangible,

representational view”. By placing the factor of time Kawara allows the viewer to have, in a sense, a live experience of the moments that went in to producing the painting. What I mean is that the fact that the viewer has prior knowledge that this particular painting was produced over the span of a single day, they are able to be taken back into a moment that has already past, and are able to experience the sensation that they are viewing the object in real time. This provides for a sense of breakdown and buildup of time. Henning Weidemann argues, the spectator experiences the paintings' "Today" as "Yesterday," the preserved "uniqueness of the moment" generically (Chiong). I tend to agree with Weideman, that Kawara's date paintings have a very singular monumental feel to them, in that even though the dates on the individual paintings have passed, they still feel relevant and contemporary. “Clearly, what Dan Cameron describes as Kawara's "now" has everything to do with an "imperative of the present” (Chiong). I believe what Cameron is trying to do is lessen the divide of the past and the present and produce a fluid ever changing timeline that can represent the relation of time, dates, years, and past moments in a way that shows the interconnectivity.



Date Paintings, On Kawara, Acrylic on canvas

## HIGH BROW, LOW BROW, NO BROW, ARTE POVERA, UNMONUMENTAL (MATERIALITY)

“Debates about modern culture have become second nature to us, whether we want to uphold the old hierarchies, critique them, or somehow overthrow them” (Foster). I believe this is an ever present factor in how contemporary artists choose to approach concepts and materiality in their work. These works are automatically infused with meaning from the moment they choose materials. Most materials have a history to them. What I mean is that a medium such as oil paint or printmaking have a built in tradition and movements associated with them, which an artist must choose to highlight, challenge, or treat with indifference. These mediums are viewed as classical high-brow art mediums. They are the mediums that the average museum goer thinks of when they think of art with a capital a. They believe these mediums to be high-brow, while materials such as trash or pop culture kitsch items are seen as low-brow. However, Hal Foster, noted art critic and historian, has proposed that the terms low and high brow do not represent the full spectrum. This idea of a no brow society in which culture decides what should be considered high and low, or if this system is even relevant at all with the spread of ideas and information.” For Seabrook, “The New Yorker critic-at-large and writer of the book *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture*, identity must be authentic, and it can only be made so in no-brow culture through a personal sampling of pop goods at the megastore” (Foster). This gives the interest of the whole a greater importance, and allows what we consume to dictate these terms. This creates a shift in power and allows for the creation of a new term that better describes this shift, no-brow. No brow is where, “commercial culture is a source of status,” not of disdain” (Foster). This concept of culture being the creator of status, and when I say culture I mean consumer culture in dealing with the ideas behind high-brow, low-brow, and no-brow, in a



certain respect creates a new class system, or really a new hierarchy. This new hierarchy may not be in terms of dollar amounts and prestige certain paintings, objects, or products can ascertain, but more in respect to how these things are now viewed. In “Design and Crime”, by Hal Foster he writes about how the New Yorker at the height of its power and prestige was seen as high-brow, is now in a sort of limbo not really falling into either the high-brow or low-brow system. This is due in large part to the ease of access that is now achievable in the dotcom era. An individual in Johnson City, Tennessee has the ability to access the same exact articles that a millionaire on Fifth Avenue may read. So here in lies the conflict that I came across, how can something that is commercially successful such as the New Yorker Magazine be no longer considered high-brow?



Plug In #33: Igloo Nero, Mario Merz, (1967-1979), 1994

Collection Van Abbemuseum.



Discograhhy Series (detail)

Storm Ketron

2012-2013



Discograhhy Series

Storm Ketron

2012-2013

## FACTORY, ORGANIZATION (STRUCTURE)

“In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men” (Benjamin). This idea that men could reproduce the work of other men lead me to start to examining how this has been done in a more contemporary sense in terms of factory production and or reproduction of products/parts. I was raised in the town of Bristol, Tennessee where the Pointer Brand is located. “Pointer makes work clothes that are part of the rural South: a light canvas jacket worn into the field in the morning and removed as the sun rises, dungarees and overalls of various types depending on well-marked preferences: low-back in Kentucky, high-back in Georgia” (Horyn) This company working in the South producing clothing still manufactured in a way separate from that of the mass production present in china comes to represent a contemporary method of handmade production.

The German philosopher and literary critic wrote about reproduction and its significance to the art world in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin writes of the loss of the aura through the mechanical reproduction of art itself. The aura for Benjamin represents the originality and authenticity of a work of art that has not been reproduced. A painting has an aura while a photograph does not; the photograph is an image of an image while the painting remains utterly original. So then can something be both mass produced without mechanical methods and still have this aura? I believe that the format of pieces can be the same, and then these individual formats may be manipulated through methods such as painting, drawing, etching, collage to then become unique individual pieces with an aura.

## TIME

Time is fundamental in my process of creating work, but also in the outcome and overall aesthetic of my pieces. My work revolves around this universal limit. Time, especially the boundaries and limitations it provides, enables me a freedom in process where every line, mark, or clump of mud laid down is a reminder of the moment in time in which it was created. The constraints of time within the format of song lengths create limitations within the process of my pieces. Artists such as On Kawara, Darren Almond and Christian Marclay's work revolves around issues of time the experience of the "now". So how can we define 'now'? It is the only bit of time whose definition we can even logically attempt, the only part that truly exists, because the past is always over, and the future has never yet begun. But the present moment, the Now, eternally eludes understanding - as soon as we attempt to grasp it, it is already transformed into the past" (Bush).



Tide, 2008, Darren Almond, Digital wall clocks, Perspex, electro-mechanics, steel, vinyl, computerized electronic control system and components



The Clock, Christian Marclay, 2010

Kawara's work uses time as an object of the past. The "now" that he is displaying with his Date paintings has already passed, what is left is the reminder, the documentation of that particular day. The individual pieces in my Discography Series function as reminders or documentation of the "now" in which they were created. These come to represent minutes and seconds of actions which is dictated by the individual song length. This creates a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present (Smithson).



Today Series, On Kawara, 1989, acrylic on canvas

The Discography Series draws influence from cultural responses to time and how quickly climates, in both a socio-political sense, change and the overall speed of information that is available to the individual. I believe this has greatly influenced the speed and techniques that I apply in my own practice. I am forced and controlled through the time frame of a song's length to make these impulsive, and usually aggressive/angry marks onto the surface of my individual pieces. I consume the song dynamics, not in a regular sense, but in a sense that I engage in the tones of the song or the overarching feel of the song and simultaneously spew marks or objects onto the surface. This time limit gives the sensation of automation in my work I feel as if each song is a part of a larger unit, where I am just a single assembly line worker putting the correct pieces in the correct order in as fast of a pace as the line dictates. This is the state in which I create the discography series. I believe this notion of the creation of art being a mechanical/labor process comes from my upbringing and how I was witness to the everyday automatism of the workplace that my father was a part of. My father was working at the Electrolux plant at the Bristol, Tennessee location when I was growing up. According to the official website,

Electrolux, which has been in business since 1919, “is a global leader in the manufacturing of home appliances and appliances for professional use” (About Electrolux). I became fascinated in the way time was a driving force for all activity, from the process of clocking in and clocking out of work to the allotted time to complete certain designated processes in the assembly line system. This fascination with the idea that a certain object or product must be completed in a certain limited time frame is the basis of how my Discography Series pieces are set up.

I see our society as one that is so dependent on planning out every aspect of our day down to the time each individual activity takes that we become trapped by schedule and format. Everything from a thirty minute lunch break to a ten minute break allowing for bathroom use, smoke breaks, or phone calls become a part of the everyday time limit for events furthering productivity in the work place. I see the limitation of time as a way to interact with the period in which so many of our activities are performed in the time frame of an individual song. In my experience most of my day is experienced by how many songs are listened to in the time frame of certain events. These song lengths begin to take on a completely new context, they no longer represent a listening experience, but morph into a way of engaging time.

This idea of forming compositions that are dictated by the length of an individual song is my way of relating my own art practice to that of the laborer/factory worker. I am able to place restrictions on my work, in a similar way that my father experienced producing vacuum parts at Electrolux when I was young. The artist Darren Almond, who grew up in a small coalmining village, engages time and is highly influenced by the rhythm of the machine, much in the same way I am fascinated by the rhythm of the factory’s of my upbringing, “Almond is fascinated by trains and travel, clocks and television, automatic fans and electronic music: these are the ingredients for works that meditate on changing conceptions of time and space, as experienced

by human subjects caught between an industrial past and an electronic present (Bush).” This thought of being trapped between the industrial past and the electronic future is also present in my Discography Series. Nods to the industrial past are seen in my mass produced, hand cut pieces of Bristol board. These formatted starting points reference the patterns used for manufactured products. These patterns are then transformed by the electronic present in the form of contemporary music. I manipulate the basic structure of the individual Discography pieces in the time frame of a song length.

## MATERIALITY

The materials I include or exclude from my series play a crucial role in both concepts for the work as well as dictating what types of marks I can implement. I am informed by the ideas of low brow, high brow, and no brow, and how these terms are placed on certain objects or materials. This ideal of the different section of the “brows is influenced by the writings and concepts found in Hal Foster’s book “Design and Crime” in which I talked about earlier, but now manifests itself in the influences that go into the creation of the Discography Series. I challenge the viewer to make assumptions about the worth of certain materials and to engage in how these assumptions were formed. I am interested in the difference between a painting done in the traditional oil paint method, versus one of my discography pieces completed using mediums as diverse as crayons, faux fur from a Halloween costume, Scotch tape, or mud.





Discography Series (detail), Storm Ketron, 2013, Mixed Media

On display at the Unmonumental exhibition held at the New Museum artists such as Sarah Lucas, Isa Genzken, Jim Lambie, and Rachel Harrison also explore ideas of low brow materials as high brow art. They combine alternative art materials such as cement, brick, fur, and bubble wrap in much the same way that they are implemented in my Discography Series. These artists are responding to a cultural climate, characterized by an indiscriminate amount of styles, trends and ways of making, through deliberately apathetic formal gestures that run against the grand allusions of modern art's rarefied steel and marble towers. These artists are breaking down

the aggrandized thoughts of what an art object should be. I choose materials that function in much the same way. Instead of a marble or bronze sculpture I instead choose Crayola crayons, or faux fur.



*Empire Vampire I*, Isa Genzken, *Elefant*, 2006



*Fuck Destiny*, Sarah Lucas, 2000



*Huffy Howler*, Rachel Harrison, mixed media, 2004



*Split Endz*, (wig mix), Jim Lambie 2005 mixed media

Along with influences from the Unmonumental exhibit, the concepts found in the *arte povera* movement explore similar structures that I try to exhibit in the Discography Series. Robert Smithson wrote about the idea of the new monument, saying “Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, they are made out of plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages (Smithson). I believe that the idea of the “new monuments” allowing us to forget the future and focus on the objects of the now, whether they be ironic nods to the past in the way of pop culture references or modern day building materials is present in both my Discography Series as well as the artists in the Unmonumental exhibition. Here they are allowed to as Smithson puts it fight against the ages. They combine the past with the present, both condemn and celebrate current culture, and choose to move away from art materials such as marble bronze and oil paint. Smithson hits on ideas of social and political engagement, and a somewhat confrontational approach to the materials that represent the establishment such as the marble and granite, the materials I implore lack the grandeur and the longevity, they represent the present state of decay and immediate action that upsets the notion of the established materials.

“It makes sense that debris would emerge today as a favored artistic medium. How better to figure the various leitmotifs of our blurred and shattered present, when theories of "regime change" and "creative destruction" dictate global policy” (Relyea)? This same cultural debris is what makes its way into the Discography Series. I use the refuse the unused or discarded items that make their way into my studio or surround my house. These materials are seen as art debris in my Discography Series. They are the fragments of canvas from previous discarded canvases, unusable mark making devices such as pens and pigment, and left over building supplies.

The series that I am working on in conjunction with my Discography Series involves the use of mud, dirt, clay, or any combination of the three to engage viewers through materiality, as well as a catalyst for conceptual ideals in the work. I deconstruct and reconstruct, manipulate, as well as am manipulated by these materials. I use mud as a device to explore the idea of location, both physically and conceptually. I construct installation pieces out of these materials, deconstruct the structures, and the reconstruct what is left regimentally in a fashion similar to that of a lower middle class American living in poverty, who improvises quick fixes out of materials on hand. My use of material reflects both my upbringing in the southern town of Bristol, Tennessee, as well as my interest in the art critic and historian Hal Foster's writing on low brow, high brow, and no brow culture. Materials such as mud, expanding insulation foam, faux fur, and crayons are used as low brow fixes in a high brow context in my Wall Deconstruction Series. These lowbrow fixes challenge ideas of wealth disparity and ask the question, is this what wealthy people have between their walls? I use these materials to reconstruct the holes, tears or missing sections of the original object. I draw influence in the area of materiality from the artist, Alexandra Bircken, who was exhibited in the Unmonumental exhibition at the New Museum in 2007. In an interview with This Is Contemporary Art Magazine the importance of material in Bircken's work was evident. "The materials Bircken uses play an extremely important role in defining her sculptures. Drawing both on "worthless" scraps and materials traditionally used in the arts and crafts, she repurposes them by applying various handicraft techniques and assembling them into works of art." (Alexandra Bircken: Household Assets). This idea of Bircken using materials that are considered "worthless" harkens back to the art critic and historian Hal Foster's writings on low brow, high brow, and no brow, which then influence my work on the Wall Deconstruction Series. Artist Gedi Sibony also

examines the importance of material. Often evoking the modesty of everyday materials, neo-formalism appeals to the simplicities of artistic labor, a last bastion of humanity's endangered (yet "enduring") tactile engagement with matter (Geers). This tactile engagement with matter goes through in Sibony's work with his use of the everyday materials of constructions. Wooden doors and industrial carpet are given a new life in the gallery from the debris of the everyday they gain greater implied significance and come to represent labor as art, in a similar way that I am working with industrial materials.

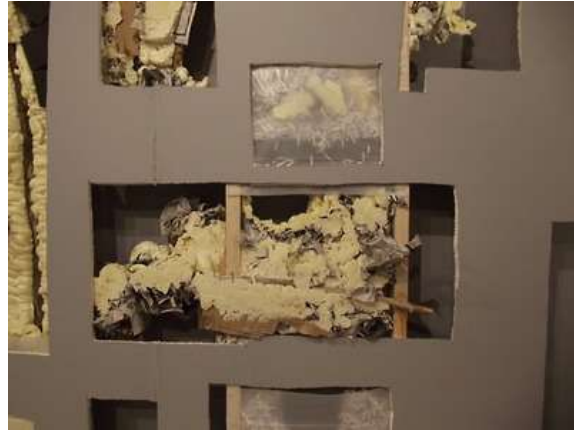


All Her Teeth Are Made of Slate, Gedi Sibony, 2013, wood paint and screws. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.



The Cutters, Gedi Sibony, 2010, Canvas, paint, wall, and vinyl. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

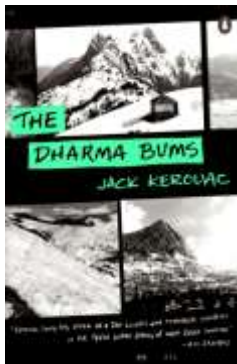




Wall Deconstruction (details), Storm Ketron 2013

## STRUCTURE

As I began to examine why I make the decisions that drive my bodies of work, I started to notice the inclusion of several key processes. The most noticeable of these processes is my decision to create a format from which each piece is derived. I created the basic size limitation that each Discography piece would be started from by copying the dimensions of the Jack Kerouac novel, *Dharma Bums*. The basic size format from which each individual Discography starts out (5 by 7  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches) allows me to create a sense of uniformity and cohesive repetition. As I have been questioning what it is about having these pieces roughly the same size.



*Dharma Bums*, Jack Kerouac, 1958



The format and grid placement of the discography series are also in response to the memories of growing up in an area where most of the jobs, including the factory that my father worked at while I was young, where the products being made there were systematically mass-produced, allowing for a grid like format of creation. This influences the way in which each piece starts out as a systematically produced format that is then manipulated, as well as the way in which I display individual pieces in groups allowing for the interactions of series. I create these series of discographies placing disparate and separate responses directly in confrontation between each other, side by side in a grid formation, vying for the viewers attention. They begin to pulse and overwhelm the eye, what areas, which pieces is one attracted too? I have always been interested in this question, why are we predisposed and drawn to materials, color combinations, and placement? I ask these very same questions in my own studio, I sit for hours sometimes days in front of these series without creating a new piece, examining why I place one work next to another. I begin to consume these images emerge into a place where all of the noise they are creating simultaneously runs into the same muddled phrase or note or conversation. This is how I wander through the everyday, trying to separate the noise into understandable fragments that can be further broken down into words and syllables with known meanings. The organization of the individual sets relates back to the overarching theme of time. The sets are arranged by the dates that each individual piece was created. I then arrange the individual pieces together within a particular time frame that I decide. I create these parameters that may represent pieces that span a few weeks, to months at a time depending on the relationships and interactions that the pieces begin to form. I view the arrangement of sets as an almost pseudo family units. The interaction that individual pieces have with one another simply by being placed in similar proximity is fascinating to me. These pieces may have a completely disparate mood when paired



next to another piece. I believe that the dates in which singular pieces or groupings are created dictate the.

As I am producing the discography series I cannot help but relate the mechanical nature of production that I use in this series to the experiences that I experienced as a child. Almost all of my friends, as well as myself, had a father, or mother, or both of their parents working in factories around the area. My father worked for a company that produced vacuum cleaner parts originally named ELECTROLUX but now called AERUS. He worked for the company for over twenty years, and I can't help but to think back and relate to his days working in the plant when I am creating my own discography series. I have a mechanized process in which I spend several large passages of time marking the dimensions of each individual piece, and cutting out by hand hundreds of the fundamental pieces of Bristol board that I use as a base to produce the discography pieces. I try to relate this process to that of my father's work during his time working at ELECTROLUX. I view my activity of creation as a sort of tribute in honor of the factory worker. I am proud of the fact that I was raised in the south as well as the work my family has done. I view the everyday worker or laborer, or farmer as artists just like the artists in the museums and galleries. The way these workers manipulate materials, and landforms is something that I myself try to apply to my own process in regards to the creation of both my Discography and Wall Deconstruction Series.



Electrolux Factory



Wall Deconstruction, Storm Ketron, 2013, Mixed Media

Repetition and the act of searching for an individual sense of perfection through repetition is a main theme in this body of work. I perform actions that I am driven to perform repetitively in a fashion that makes for a certain absurdity. What I mean by this is that I perform tasks in sequences that can number in the hundreds in order to fulfill a quest for personal perfection. I then have to define what personal perfection is to make sense of my previous comment. Personal perfection may never be reached in my pieces, I believe my idea of personal perfection is performing a task in repetition until the possibilities and parameters that I create have been exhausted in such a way that satisfies my own selfish need for personal satisfaction. This enduring of actions, or formats, or materials, until personal satisfaction and relief is experienced creates an environment of unfulfilled tension within my studio, adding to the chaos within the constraints of format.



Discography Series, Storm Ketron, 2013; Mixed Media

## CONCLUSION

Upon the completion of the work that was exhibited in my BFA show and after writing this thesis, I have come to the realization that I didn't need to, or find exacting answers to the questions I posed for myself at the start of these projects. There is a feeling of futility in the work that I produce. I found this idea of futility to also be present in this thesis. I found it unnecessary to try and define exactly what I was doing when I myself may not fully realize why I make certain artistic decisions. I would have found more futility in forcing myself to definitively answer these questions, than to allow an open almost unresolved state to exist in which further investigation is deemed necessary, and finality is not yet realized. I discovered that I no longer

needed to fear a lack of complete closure. At 23, I am still trying to embrace this feeling of not having all of the answers all of the time and that is alright. That is alright.

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